CineFiles University of California Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive

Document Citation

Title	**Magick in theory and practice : ritual use of colour in Kenneth Anger's Invocation of my demon brother**
Author(s)	Deborah Allison
Source	*Senses of cinema*
Date	2004 Oct
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	17
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Invocation of my demon brother, Anger, Kenneth, 1969

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

Invocation of My Demon Brother

Magick in Theory and Practice: Ritual Use of Colour in Kenneth Anger's *Invocation of My Demon Brother*

by Deborah Allison

Deborah Allison has taught at University of Kent and University of East Anglia in the UK. She is currently based at City University in London where she is working on a research project centred on the contemporary British film industry.

In 1970 Kenneth Anger received *Film Culture*'s Tenth Independent Film Award

> *...for his film* Invocation of My Demon Brother *specifically, and for his entire creative work in general; for his unique fusion of magick, symbolism, myth, mystery and vision with the most modern sensibilities, techniques and rhythms of being...* (1)

Invocation of My Demon Brother (1969) is the eighth of Anger's nine extant short films, which are collectively titled *The Magick Lantern Cycle* (1947–1980). Not one of Kenneth Anger's best-known works, *Invocation* has come to be eclipsed by the earlier pieces, *Fireworks* (1947) and *Scorpio Rising* (1963), in the pantheon of American avant-garde films that are regularly revived by film societies and universities. In this essay, I will show that it remains one of Kenneth Anger's richest works, in terms of its use of symbol and ritual, and is a title that deserves greater critical recognition than it has been afforded in recent years.

As well as providing an overdue reappraisal of the film, the broader purpose of this essay derives from the opportunity offered by *Invocation* – and, indeed, several of Anger's other films – to examine the functioning of colour in cinema. This is in itself a surprisingly neglected area. Whilst the topic has been tackled by a number of previous writers, the relative scarcity of material on the subject fails to reflect the importance of this aspect of *mise en scène* to countless films of both the mainstream and avant-garde cinemas (2).

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

My account of the ways in which colour is used in *Invocation of My Demon Brother* raises certain issues that are pertinent to a broad spectrum of films while, at the same time, the discussion centres on a representational system that is peculiar to the film's director. In doing so, it describes the extent to which Anger's adoption of modern occultism has helped to define his use of colour, just as it has determined his choice of other filmic elements.

The importance of occult ideas to Anger's films, and the extent to which they are shaped by ritual, is highlighted in Anger's own accounts of his work, and has also provided a focal point for a great deal of previous critical writing. Carel Rowe has shown a particular commitment to exploring this aspect of Anger's cinema, but it is also central to the writings of Tony Rayns, P. Adams Sitney, William C. Wees and Anna Powell, amongst others (3). This essay follows in this tradition but, in focusing upon Anger's ritual use of colour, it explores an aspect of his film style that has hitherto been largely overshadowed by focus upon his iconography and/or editing (4). This essay also provides a slightly more detailed account of some of the central tenets of 20th century occultism than is customary in writings about Anger, by which means I hope to illuminate further the complex set of ideas and representational systems that *Invocation* proffers. Neither my discussions of colour theory nor occultism are in any way exhaustive, but the points selected will suffice to demonstrate some of the intricate patterns of symbolism that operate in this work, and show some of the ways in which it relates to the other films of the *Magick Lantern Cycle*.

Crowley, Lucifer and the "Demon Brother"

Each of Anger's films is framed as a ritual. They depict rituals and, if one accepts Anger's stated intentions, they also perform rituals; the various elements within each film are calculated to have specific effects upon the viewer. As Carel Rowe has succinctly explained

> *All his films have been evocations or invocations, attempting to conjure primal forces which, once visually released, are designed to have the effect of 'casting a spell' on the audience. The Magick in the film is related to the magickal effects of the film on the audience* (5).

Whilst it is true that all films are designed in such a way as to encourage certain responses in the viewer, the unusual characteristic of the films in the *Magick Lantern Cycle* is the extent to which both the subject matter and systems of representation are explicitly structured according to occult practice. Such beliefs may not feature significantly in the orthodoxies of film studies as a discipline, but in order to reach any understanding of the rituals depicted in *Invocation*, or the parallel ways in which Anger intends the audience to be affected by the ritual of film spectatorship, they need to be explained.

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

Aleister Crowley

Perhaps the single strongest influence on Kenneth Anger, evident from both films and interviews, has been that of the English occultist Aleister Crowley (1875–1947). Crowley coined the term *magick* to refer to the system of occult beliefs that he propounded and to distinguish them from traditional systems of magic. Crowley's most significant contributions to early 20th century occultism were the integration of Nietzschean thought along with principles derived from the budding science of psychology. He defined magick as "the Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity with the Will", and argued that every intentional act is a magickal act (6). The religious doctrine that he developed, known as the "Holy Law of Thelema", centres on his maxim, "Do what thou Wilt shall be the whole of the Law" (7). One should not assume, though, that he intended this as a license for the execution of any whim. Rather, he argued, one should act only after a lengthy process of self-examination through which the "true will", and one's true nature, is discovered. "Do what thou wilt", claimed Crowley, "is to bid the stars to shine, the vine to bear grapes, water to find its level. Man is the only being in nature who has striven to set himself at odds with himself" (8).

Crowley's theory postulates a "higher" part of oneself that one must access in order to understand one's true will, along with the power and self-control required to act upon it. This higher self is sometimes referred to as the "demon brother", so that the title of the film, *Invocation of My Demon Brother*, can be read as a reference to a ritualised process of self-development. For Anger, the figure of the demon brother is closely linked to another figure that plays a central role in his oeuvre. This is Lucifer who, whilst occupying a very minor position in Crowley's pantheon, is an important presence in each of Anger's films, whether he is implicitly or overtly represented. In each film a ritual is performed to invoke the powers that the director associates with Lucifer, an archetype with whom Anger as a magician wishes to identify. For Anger, Lucifer is both the "patron saint of movies", in his capacity as god of light, and "the rebel angel behind what's happening in the world today whose message is that the key of joy is disobedience" (9). As conceived by Anger, he is a figure linking a preoccupation with individuality and the spirit of the Aquarian Age.

Crowley describes the methods to be used for communing with the demon brother. In everyone, he claims, there is "a consciousness to be attained by prescribed methods" (10). "Each human being", he argues, "is an element of the cosmos, self-determined and supreme, coequal with all other gods" (11). According to Crowley's Holy Law of Thelema, one must master the various forces that exist in the universe in order to achieve this higher state of consciousness and become one's own master. The occultist's world view does

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

not admit to a single omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent deity, but posits instead a range of forces allowing the magician the status of a god once s/he has gained full mastery of them. These forces are named after gods and planets, and are deemed to exist either externally or within one's mind. Although internalisation of these forces was a feature of some earlier occult theories, it was not until the late 19th century that the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, to which Crowley belonged for a time, emphasised psychological factors of occultism. Crowley, like the Golden Dawn, regarded preparations and rituals as self-development techniques and he drew on the work of Freud and Jung to explain how rituals could be used to access elements of one's inner being. He argued of gods, spirits, planes, spheres and other ordering principles of magick, "It is immaterial whether they exist or not. By doing certain things certain results follow; students are most earnestly warned against attributing objective reality or philosophic validity to any of them" (12).

For the Crowleyite, to invoke the force and power of a particular god does not necessarily presuppose a belief in his/her metaphysical or historical existence, nor the religious dogma surrounding that figure. It is simply a way of referencing a particular psychic force. Such forces are seldom burdened with notions of morality, and are considered by the magician to be neither good nor evil. Heat, writes Crowley, in a trivial but clear illustration, is good for coffee but bad for ice cream (13). Each force has, in occult terminology, a "positive" and "negative" aspect, which are anthropomorphised into the figures of angels and demons. These forces are frequently associated with gods and/or planets, which act as nodes around which a range of attributes are clustered. This is known as the system of "correspondences". For instance, just a few of the associations with the god and the planet Mars are fire, violence, destruction, the colour red, iron, the basilisk, the oak, the nettle, the ruby, tobacco and the astrological sign of Scorpio (14). The ritual use of items associated with a particular force is believed to assist the magician's invocation of that force. It helps the magician to focus concentration and build a mental map of where he wants to be in psychic terms – "the coordinates of consciousness" as Colin Low has termed it (15). Costumes, objects of particular shapes, colours or substances, can all function as talismans that represent and connect the state of consciousness at which the magician aims with the aesthetics of his surroundings. The theory of correspondences has made a considerable impact both within and without occult practice, finding its aesthetic epitome in the Symbolist movement.

Magickal Ritual and the Cinema

Kenneth Anger's intention that his films both depict and perform rituals, "casting a spell" on the audience, reached its zenith with *Invocation of My Demon Brother*, which can be read as one of the most masterfully constructed rituals in *The Magick Lantern Cycle*. The detail and complexity with which it is fashioned is no less astonishing than the extremely visceral responses that it creates in most viewers. Although many may be reluctant to accept the notion that such reactions arise from the film's implementation of a spell, when couched in other language the underlying ideas may come to sound more orthodox.

Anger has spoken of the belief in the power of the photograph to steal the soul, which has been attributed to some "primitive" societies (16). The origins of such beliefs have been explained by anthropologist J. G. Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, his classic study of magic and religion. He describes the principles of "sympathetic magic", which state that a powerful link exists between things that are similar in appearance or that have come into contact

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

with one another. For example, voodoo magic may aim to harm a person by performing a ritual using a doll that resembles the intended victim. Frazer describes this as "imitative magic". The spell would be deemed more likely to succeed if the doll were augmented by an object that the victim had come into contact with, such as piece of hair or clothing. Frazer describes this as "contagious magic" (17).

It is possible to draw parallels between Frazer's categorisation of the principles of magical tradition and a system of classification that most film academics will find rather more familiar. This is C. S. Peirce's classification of signs as icon, index or symbol. Imitative magic relies on an iconic connection between magical ritual and its victim or beneficiary. Contagious magic, on the other hand, depends upon an indexical relationship. As Peirce argued, a photograph, or film, is simultaneously icon and index (18). Thus, each can be read as a particularly powerful talisman, using both imitative and contagious magic.

Anger has named the cinematograph as his "magickal weapon" (19). His films are "incantations" composed in a "magickal language", a language described by Crowley simply as "that which is understood by the people I wish to instruct" (20). Like Crowley's book, *Magick in Theory and Practice*, in which this thesis is laid out, "the composition and distribution of (Anger's films)

Invocation of My Demon Brother

is thus an act of MAGICK by which (he) cause(s) change to take place in conformity with (his) will" (21). The cinema can show apparent acts of magic, such as the trick photography pioneered by Meliès but, if one accepts Crowley's definition, it can also perform genuine acts of magick. At the forefront of this power is its ability to act upon the spectator in such a way as to engender ideas and emotions.

Invocation of My Demon Brother depicts a ritual intended to conjure forth the powers that Anger associates with Lucifer and, in doing so, to access the demon brother or higher self. Through their act of submission to the film, Anger aims to reproduce in the audience, to some degree at least, the state of consciousness achieved by the participants of the ritual depicted. At the time the film was made, Anger's conception of Lucifer was still closely tied to the figure and force of Mars. The invocation is a battle cry in a period of transition between an old order and a new. He explains that period of transition in terms that differ somewhat from standard astrological accounts:

> *The age that ended in 1962 was the Piscean Age... which was the age of Jesus Christ. Where the Piscean Age was ruled by Neptune, the planet of mysticism, the Aquarian Age is ruled by Uranus, the most erratic planet of all... it's the sign of the unexpected, revolution... The last 2000 years were based on renunciation, sacrifice and guilt. The fight for the next generation, the next 25 years, 50 years,*

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

> *is skinning off the shell that's left over from the last era* (22).

The conflict of opposites, the skinning off the shell of the Piscean age, is articulated in *Invocation* by way of an abrasive juxtaposition of images through montage, a grating soundtrack and an emphasis on the colours of Mars. It is intended, in Anger's words, as "an attack on the sensorium" (23).

Debates About the Significance of Colour

The ways in which *Invocation of My Demon Brother* uses colour in order to influence the spectator are manifold. Colour is not used primarily for naturalistic depictions of objects, although this occurs. Nor is it used merely in a symbolic fashion, though this occurs too. Crucially, it is designed to act in very specific ways upon the viewer, which may often reach beyond his/her conscious interpretation of colour meaning.

The extent to which colours can stimulate responses in those who experience them, and the means by which they do so, remains the subject of an unresolved debate. Some scientists have endeavoured to demonstrate that exposure to colour can trigger biochemical responses in the human organism. Others assert, to the contrary, that responses to colours are the result of acquired knowledge of their cultural coding. Both of these perspectives can illuminate the intended functioning of colour in *Invocation*.

It is widely accepted within modern science and medicine that light from the edges of the spectrum – invisible to the eye, such as ultraviolet – can cause temporary or permanent alterations within the human body. It is less clearly established whether visible colours at the centre of the spectrum can have similar effects. One scientist and physician who believed that they could was J. Dodson Hessey. He made several claims about the action of colour on glands, including the allegation that exposure to the colour red increases the activity of the male sex glands (24). Such claims have been challenged by rival specialists who argue that Hessey, and other researchers asserting the existence of physiological responses to colours, have conducted their experiments without sufficient scientific objectivity. Research has persisted nevertheless and, in the 1990s, Jules B. Davidoff noted that studies by a range of scientists had led to similar conclusions. Most of this research has focused on the causal connections between emotional states and exposure to colours. In summarising their findings he writes:

> *Warm (the 'red' end of the spectrum) and cold (the 'blue' end of the spectrum) colours have been found to differentially alter both physiological and emotional states... Colour is also believed to produce a direct effect on the endocrine system via the pituitary gland; its action is to increase aggressive behaviour under long-wave (red) light and reduce it under short-wave (blue/violet) light* (25).

Colour therapist Faber Birren claims that exposure to red actually increases pulse rate and blood pressure although Davidoff rejects this as a spurious claim (26). He does acknowledge, nevertheless, the startling effects that colours have been proven to have on less complex organisms and admits "it could be that some remnant of our evolution is lodged in the human sub cortical networks" (27).

Whilst the controversy about the physiological effects of colour remains unresolved, other investigations have focused upon psychological effects. These have tended to centre on links between colours and physical objects, explaining emotional states arising from colour exposure as acquired causal

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

responses to associations with specific objects. Commonly cited examples include red with blood and fire, white with snow and black with night. Acknowledging the ubiquity of such associations, Wittgenstein has argued that "it is worthless and of no use for the understanding of painting to speak of the characteristics of the individual colours. When we do it, we are really only thinking of special uses" (28). He argues that colour meaning is not intrinsic to colour itself, but arises instead from the set of conventions that determine the symbolic use of colour in art. In so doing, he differs from writers such as Hessey and Davidoff who believe that physiological responses play an important role in causing psychological responses.

Given the inconclusiveness of research into the ability of colour to effect physiological change, it is perhaps more useful to focus upon common associations between colours, objects and emotions: the psychological effects of the cultural coding of colour. Faber Birren provides a table of empirically derived common colour associations in American culture. He divides this into eight colour categories: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, white and black. Although studies have shown that linguistic constraints have no influence on the ability to differentiate between hues, both memory and description of colour are limited by language. Research has demonstrated that the number of shades easily recalled by different populations has been significantly defined by linguistic constraints. These, it has often been argued, have been determined in their turn by the colour distribution of objects in the cultural landscape. It is therefore significant that Birren's research is specific to 20th century Americans. As such, his study has immediate applications to *Invocation of My Demon Brother*.

One of the most oft-used colours in *Invocation* is red. Birren itemises the following associations with this colour:

General appearance: brilliant, intense, opaque, dry
Mental associations: hot, fire, heat, blood
Direct associations: danger, Christmas, Fourth of July, St. Valentines, Mother's Day, flag
Objective impressions: passionate, exciting, fervid, active
Subjective impressions: intensity, rage, rapacity, fierceness (29)

Invocation of My Demon Brother

He uses the phrase "objective impressions" to refer to the qualities an object is deemed to possess, whilst "subjective impressions" are those that become psychologically active in the viewer. This differentiation of qualities helps him to analyse why some colours have contradictory sets of associations.

Most of the associations and impressions of the colour red that he lists are reinforced through the ways that they have been taken up by various media.

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

Red (passionate, exciting) is the traditional colour of brothel lighting. It both signals the establishment as such ("red light district") and attempts to rouse the passions of the clientele. (Hessey would argue that this response would be physiological as well as associative.) It is often associated with flamboyance in women's clothing and can be read as a sign of loose sexual morals – in movies think of the red petticoat of the eponymous *Sapphire* (Basil Dearden, 1959), or Cary (Jane Wyman)'s red dress in the opening party scene of *All That Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1955). In verbal discourse, too, we have adopted colour psychology, and regularly use such expressions as "painting the town red", "seeing red", "red-letter days", "feeling blue" and "black list". The permeation of our everyday language by such associations between mood and colour can be seen as a powerful demonstration, and perhaps also a cause, of the depth of the roots of such associations in mass psychology.

Although many colour associations are widely recognised, the meaning of colour is far from absolute. In some cases a colour may have a range of quite contradictory associations, perhaps none more so than green, which is pointedly used by Anger in most of his films, including *Invocation*. Sergei Eisenstein has written of green being "directly associated with the symbols of life – young leaf-shoots, foliage and 'greenery' itself – just as firmly with the symbols of death and decay – leaf-mould, slime, and the shadows on a dead face" (30). Birren has specifically linked the repugnant aspect of green to that produced by "green illumination shining on the human flesh" (31). Thus the highly saturated, non-naturalistic lighting of many theatre productions tends to produce this rather than the calming effect. Such uses can be seen widely in cinema too, ranging from Eisenstein's own *Ivan the Terrible* (1942–1946) to the scene in *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) where Judy (Kim Novak) emerges from the hotel bathroom, transformed once again into the "dead" Madeleine.

Many assumptions about colour have infiltrated cinematic discourse and certain associations have been used so widely as to approach cliché. *Rebel without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955), for instance, provides a master class in creating semantic oppositions between dull, repressive shades of brown and ochre, and vibrant jewel colours, with red used to flag moments of danger, excitement and sexuality. The capacity of colours to generate contradictory interpretations means, however, that films need to create their own contextual parameters if colour associations are to be used with precision. Eisenstein has argued that,

> *The emotional intelligibility and function of colour will rise from the natural order of establishing the colour imagery of the work... (any shade) not only evades being given a single 'value' as an absolute image, but can even assume absolutely contradictory meanings, dependent only upon the general system of imagery that has been decided upon for the particular film* (32).

There are two ways of establishing the meaning of the colour imagery. A particular colour, or colours, may be used systematically throughout the film, as we see in *Rebel without a Cause*. Alternatively, a colour may be significant only within a localised context, such as a shot or a scene, where other clues to meaning may be needed if the association is not sufficiently clichéd. *Vertigo*'s use of green is one such example.

Kenneth Anger's Ritual Use of Colour

My interpretation of Anger's use of colour in *Invocation of My Demon Brother* is based on the following assumptions. Firstly, whilst physiological effects of colour on humans have not been firmly established, there exist strong enough and consistent enough associations between colours and ideas (within Western

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

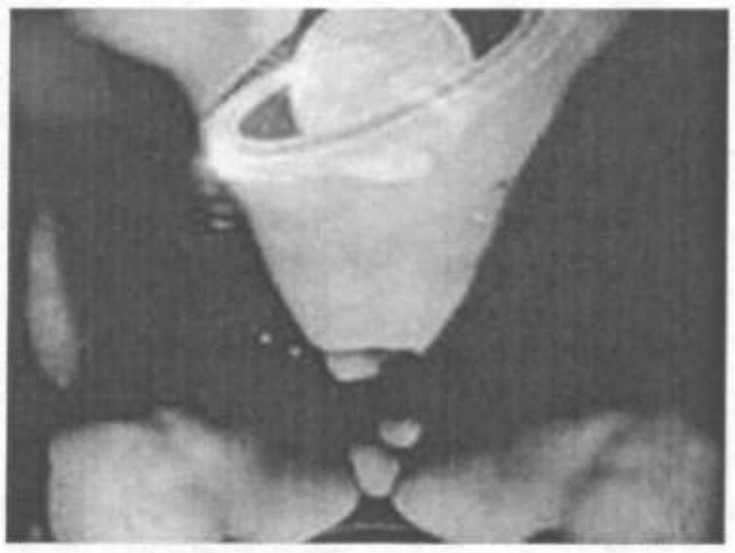
culture at least) to psychologically affect the viewer. Secondly, such effects on the viewer can be said to be "magickal" in the sense that Crowley uses the term. Any transformation that is effected in the viewer (psychological or otherwise) is a testimony to the power of the artist or magician with whom the images originate, and who has "cause(d) change to occur in conformity with the will". Thus Anger may well term his movies "spells".

Of all the films in *The Magic Lantern Cycle*, *Invocation of My Demon Brother* is perhaps the one that entails the most schematic use of colour codes and symbolism. No one film in the cycle uses colour in precisely the same way as any other. As Eisenstein argued, the meaning of colour in cinema is largely dependent upon the design of each individual text. Nevertheless, parallels can be drawn between *Invocation* and other films in the *Cycle*, whilst some of the differences that exist can be explained partly in terms of developments in the ways Anger uses colour to represent certain ideas as well as in those very ideas.

Invocation of My Demon Brother has particularly strong links with the earlier *Scorpio Rising* and can be viewed as a progression of certain ideas and effects attempted in that film. *Invocation* was created using a substantial amount of footage from an aborted project, *Lucifer Rising* (not to be confused with a later film called *Lucifer Rising* [1970–80] that was made immediately after *Invocation*). The similarity in titles suggests both commonality and difference between the two – in other words, the development of a theme. The relationship between *Scorpio* and *Invocation* might be compared to the opening pages of Anthony Burgess' novel, *A Clockwork Orange*, in so far as the meaning of a particular sign – a newly invented word in the case of the book or a particular implication of an aspect of *mise en scène* or iconography in the case of Anger's work – is clearly rendered when first used. These signs then recur in less obvious contexts, requiring the reader or viewer to rely on memory to expand their vocabulary in order to interpret later uses. *Invocation* may not be the easiest of films to get to grips with, but is far easier to make sense of after watching *Scorpio Rising*, which offers a key to the cipher. In the immediacy of the viewing experience, however, intellectual interpretation of Anger's symbolic method is eclipsed by the more visceral results of his stylistic choices.

On a visual level, the strongest similarity between *Invocation* and *Scorpio* is their domination by certain colours, in particular black and red. In each film, these colours are crucial elements of both the rituals depicted and the rituals that Anger claims the films perform. Black and red are not the only colours that are used in a similar fashion in each film though. Both use blue in the opening scenes and green in the final moments. In each case, green adds an element of the uncanny at the end, as well as pointing to key "magickal" moments elsewhere. Each film is structured according to an identical sequence of dominant colours, although the devices used to mark these colours as dominant vary in both technique and meaning.

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)



Invocation of My Demon Brother

The colours of *Invocation of My Demon Brother* function unambiguously within the occult dialectic that is set up. Like *Scorpio Rising*, *Invocation* is split into a tripartite structure less by narrative elements than by the prevailing colours and their connotations. These parts correspond to the three primary colours of light: blue, red and green. When combined, these colours generate the pure white light that can be seen to represent Lucifer, god of light, and the demon brother with which he is identified. Three opposites fuse in an alchemical union, the product of which transcends the sum of its parts. The distinction between the three stages in the films is not absolute however, as green appears at earlier moments in each. These are key moments that are thematically linked with the end sections in which the colour dominates.

I have indicated that a range of techniques can be used in order to mark the dominance of particular colours. Significant variables include not only the sequence in which colours occur but also the iconographic element that is distinctive for its colouring, the frequency with which a colour is used, the area of the screen that it covers and the level of colour saturation. A distinction should also be made between the actual colour of an object and the colour of lighting or tinting used in a shot. This can represent the difference between an object that, because of certain attributes such as colour, may be intended to function as a talisman in a magickal ritual, and a special or "magickal" effect achieved by the filmmaker that represents the transformational power of cinematic "magick". By mixing and alternating these strategic uses of colour Anger is able to represent both the process and the effect of the invocation that his film depicts.

The narrative content of *Invocation* is barely present. A gathering of dope-smoking revellers are seen amidst a décor laden with esoteric symbols. Increasingly detailed imagery of occult rituals is shown and an invocation of Lucifer is performed. The invocation sequence lacks consistency of character and location, editing together documentary and fictional material, including footage shot for the earlier *Lucifer Rising*. Integrity is maintained instead by theme, colour, symbol and sound. The invocation footage is intercut with further images of the worshippers in occult attire, which coincides with the appearance of Lucifer (Bobby Beausoleil), also intercut. In this film as in others, Anger uses a free-association of images that are connected visually and thematically. The bridge of the sound track also helps to bind the images together. Mick Jagger's synthesised score is, like the visual content, abrasive in such a way as to uphold continuity whilst frustrating attempts to completely synthesise opposing elements. Of the films in the *Magick Lantern Cycle*, this is the most hermetic and provides the greatest problems of comprehension for the non-initiate. Colour thus plays an important role in imparting some of the intended meaning to the viewer, as it is a system that most can comprehend to some degree. At the same time, it partakes in a more arcane occult system

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

of representation. Just as the actions of the characters perform a ritual or symbolic function, so the structural organisation of the film, in terms of colour, editing, sound and iconography, also functions symbolically. These symbols are themselves part of a ritual that creates an effect upon the viewer. The precise manner in which such an effect is achieved is open to debate but, even if one does not accept this claim in an occult sense, the orchestration of the various elements is capable of creating a visual rhapsody with a dramatic psychological impact.

The Colour Structure of *Invocation of My Demon Brother*

Invocation of My Demon Brother

The inaugural palette of the film is a passive, contemplative, spiritual blue. This can be seen to represent the process of mental expansion that propels the key players towards an attempt to acquire knowledge of the true self, or demon brother. The blue tones arise from the lighting rather than the colouring of profilmic objects and are not foregrounded to the extent that other colours are later in the film. The calming effect of the blue helps to lure the viewer into the second part of the film, which is dominated by red. The use of hazy blue light offsets the later more specific uses of red and black by providing a contrast. The change in technique suggests a move forward, an active liberation from the undefined haziness of earlier shots, from passive spirituality to active occultism.

The second part of *Invocation* is characterised by the dominance of red lighting, filters and tinting, in contrast to *Scorpio Rising*, where the centre section is filled with red objects. The techniques used in *Invocation* effectively eliminate all undesired supplementary colours. In most shots, virtually the entire screen is suffused with a red wash, which dominates and assimilates virtually every other colour but black. In so doing, the colour itself is emphasised more than any individual object.

The conjunction of red with black is in itself significant. Black is also a colour with many clear and consistent associations. It is most commonly connected with death and night because it is, more properly, an absence of colour, an absence of light, an absence of vision. These associations are often linked to emotional impressions such as misery and defeat. In terms of its associations, rather than its position on the colour spectrum, black can be seen as the polar opposite to red, which makes their juxtaposition striking on a psychological as well as visual level. The contrast between the two colours represents the pairing of the respective opposites of generation and destruction. In Anger's films, as elsewhere, the pairing of symbols of sex and death is common since a new order can arise only through the destruction of the old. According to the occultist's worldview, death, or symbolic death, is intrinsic to creation on any sort.

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

The central section of *Invocation of My Demon Brother* might be thought of as representing the "Scorpio" stage, in which the talismans and tools of the ritual are geared towards an imperfectly conceived goal, since the higher self, or "ideal other" cannot be accurately visualised until it is found. Like *Scorpio Rising*, which depicts only the ritual and the sacrifice, and thus contains colours largely limited to the ritual purpose of the invocation, the later film focuses on the ceremonial process. Although *Invocation* does represent the arrival of Lucifer, it does so in a manner which, in Anger's vision, has not yet been wholly liberated from that projected in the preliminary ceremonial. These colours are eventually transmuted into the green that dominates the end of each film, representing the truly magickal, the sign of the success of the ritual but not its culmination.

In *Invocation*, the use of lighting and filters means that the colour is imposed externally, in the process of the film's production, rather than arising naturally from profilmic objects. By such means, it differs from *Scorpio Rising*, which frequently forged associations between colours and objects. Here too, though, the associations between colours and certain objects often occur naturally instead of being symbolically contrived. The nature of such objects often reinforces the potency of colour associations.

The blue tones that suffuse the opening shots are broken first by images of the Wandbearer (Speed Hacker), who wears a vivid shade of green as well as being gently lit in green. From an early stage, this colour marks the imminence of highly significant events or visual signs. This image is followed by the first clearly talismanic shot of the film, the image of a black and red tattoo. Thus the colour green is used to anticipate the first image that has clear links with the magickal ritual designed for the invocation of Lucifer. The shot of the tattoo is the point at which red begins to play a significant role in the *mise en scène*. The use of black and red as the primary palette is clearly manifest from this point onwards, as a close up of a joint attached to the top of a small skull is lit in red.

The combination of this colour scheme with specific iconography provides an example of the way in which colour can reinforce visual symbols. *Scorpio Rising* had associated black and red in a clear and consistent manner with the death/rebirth polarity. In *Invocation*, this association is less schematic, although the use of the skull as an image of death is certainly one that echoes their frequent appearance in *Scorpio*. In this sequence, the colour red has perhaps a stronger association with the joint that the skull supports, rather than the skull itself. A connection can be made between the ritual of drug taking here and Anger's 1954 film, *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, in which drugs are depicted as leading to the achievement of a transcendental state.

Moments later, we are shown the image of a man's face peering through foliage. He watches from behind a lily (traditionally a funereal flower) and smiles. Here again the colour green anticipates a significant event. Once again, an association between green and voyeurism echoes *Scorpio Rising*, in which recurrent shots of a green-lit face achieve an uncanny effect. In *Inauguration*, too, the bright green face of Lord Shiva (Samson DeBrier), coloured by both light and grease paint, accomplishes a similar impact. As a poison chalice is poured, his green face looks on. Later the colour isolates him in a frame where other characters are drawn in fire shades, thus drawing attention to the manner in which his movements appear to control the rest of the image.

The shot of the face in *Invocation* differs from these other films in so far as the

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

colour arises naturally from the photographed foliage, rather than from a special effect of the lighting. Yet the use of the colour characteristically marks the imminence of a key moment in the film as it

Invocation of My Demon Brother

immediately precedes the appearance of the Magus, played by Anger himself. From this point, documentary footage of an invocation rite comprises the bulk of the material. All of the shots are entirely dominated by black and red. The robes worn, the objects used and the lighting employed are all red. During the ritual, the Magus burns a document, the resulting conflagration imposed over subsequent shots. Here the "fire" colours that dominate are referred back to the origin of some of their most important connotations.

Towards the end of the film, a shot of a green-lit skull, similar to one seen earlier in the film, recurs, this time more prominently. The green here suggests the achievement of something that is both magickal and frightening. The effect is promptly supplemented by a shift in the general colour scheme to one that uses green as a central part of the system. As in previous cases, the appearance of the colour immediately precedes a pivotal event: the appearance of Lucifer. A verbal reinforcement of the magickal aspect of the colour occurs with the appearance of a placard stating, "Zap you're pregnant that's witchcraft". Lucifer himself is robed in black and white, although the background and lighting are red. The black and white can be understood to represent the dual aspect of the god, whilst the red is a hangover from the invocation that has caused him to appear. Finally, he reappears, naked and criss-crossed with white light. He links and raises his hands, a sign of closure that marks the end of the film.

Like *Invocation, Scorpio Rising* had also ended with an alternation between red and green, although that film was resolved with a closing shot of a black belt studded with the word, "end". Chaos in both films is supplanted by the restoration of an orderly colour scheme, *Scorpio* ending in a lack of colour, in terminal blackness, whilst *Invocation* gives prominence to pure white light that shines all the brighter through its conjunction with black. This ending represents a shift from the emphasis on death that characterised *Scorpio* to the possibilities of rebirth that *Invocation* suggests and which the subsequent *Lucifer Rising* ultimately depicts.

Magick in Theory and Practice

Kenneth Anger's films are by no means the first works to fuse magic with artistic expression, although his choice of the cinema as a medium through which to offer his audience an experience structured by occult ritual endows his oeuvre with a startling originality. Symbolist painting probably represents the most widely recognised use of occult systems of representation in the modern era, although Anger has been especially keen to equate his films with poetry.

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

He has described his early, no longer extant films, such as *Who Has Been Rocking My Dreamboat* (1941) and *Escape Episode* (1944), as haiku, a poetic style that conjures ideas or emotions from a very simple juxtaposition of images, and has referred to *Fireworks*, the first film of the *Magick Lantern Cycle*, as "my black tanka" (33).

The writer Aldous Huxley has argued that spells are poetry and magicians are poets since the spell, like a poem, uses associations and symbols (34). Both are capable of working a magickal effect upon the listener (if not the world at large). Anaïs Nin has said that, "We forget that language can be used for many things, that it was used by primitive people as magic. It was used to enchant, it was used to seduce, it was used to make others feel what you feel" (35). Nin's description, though written with reference to verbal communication, speaks with equal eloquence of the range of formal devices that constitute the language of cinema. She continues, "We are admitting now that we do think unconsciously in terms of images and that symbolism and images were not only part of the Romantic movement but are a part of our makeup, since we are still dreaming in symbols despite our scientific period" (36).

Kenneth Anger's masterful harnessing of such core components of film style as colour, discussed here, and montage, widely discussed elsewhere, and his use of these techniques within a framework of occult ritual provides an opportunity to consider a range of theories pertaining to their influence upon the viewer. The debates surrounding both the physiological and psychological effects of colour can help to shed light upon the arcane systems of occult ritual that permeate his films at every level, since such an approach is closer to established methodologies of film theory and criticism than are the teachings of occultists such as Crowley, whose somewhat erratic writings have rarely been mediated by non-partisan academic studies. At the same time, careful consideration of the ways in which colour can be used in occult ritual can help to elucidate the use of colour in other contexts too. Let it not be forgotten that the first systematic categorisations of colour associations were undertaken by magicians, astrologers and cabbalists and that their conclusions continue to inform a great deal of modern colour theory.

In the intelligence and consistency with which Anger applies his carefully developed ideas about the consequences of stylistic choices – expressed in many interviews, as well as in his article, *Modesty and the Art of Film* – he excels both as theorist and practitioner (37). Although his path may be unorthodox, an exploration of his singular approach to film aesthetics can not only yield a host of viewing pleasures but can engender fresh and valuable perspectives on the ways in which cinema works.

© Deborah Allison, October 2004

This article has been refereed.

If you would like to comment on this article, please send a letter to the editors.

Endnotes

1. *Film Culture*, no. 48–49, Winter and Spring 1970, p. 9.

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

36. For examples of writing on colour in the cinema, see Edward Branigan, "The articulation of colour in a filmic system: *Two or Three Things I Know About* Her", *Wide Angle*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1976, pp. 20–31; Gorham Kindem, *Toward a semiotic theory of visual communication in the cinema: A reappraisal of semiotic theories from a cinematic perspective and a semiotic analysis of color signs and communication in the color films of Alfred Hitchcock* (Northwestern University PhD Thesis, 1977: UMI, 1988); Ralph Stephenson and J. R. Debrix, *The Cinema as Art* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1965), pp. 157–169; William Johnson, "Coming to terms with color", *Film Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 1, Fall 1966, pp. 2–22.

37. See, for instance, Carel Rowe, "Illuminating Lucifer", *Film Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 6, 1974; Tony Rayns, "Lucifer: A Kenneth Anger compendium", *Cinema*, no. 4, October 1969; P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-1978* Second Edition (Oxford University Press, New York, 1974, 1979); William C. Wees, *Light Moving in Time: Studies in the Visual Aesthetics of Avant-Garde Film* (University of California Press, 1992); Anna Powell, "The occult: A torch for Lucifer", in Jack Hunter (ed.), *Moonchild: The Films of Kenneth Anger* (Creation Books, 2002), pp. 47–104.

38. For an excellent account of Anger's use of iconography and montage in *Scorpio Rising* see Ed Lowry, "The appropriation of signs in *Scorpio Rising*", *Velvet Light Trap*, no. 20, Summer 1983.

39. Rowe, p. 26.

40. Aleister Crowley, *Magick In Theory and Practice*, Castle Books, Secaucus, 1929, 1991, p. xii.

41. Aleister Crowley, "The Book of the Law", in *The Law is For All*, New Falcon Publications, Scottsdale, 1975, 1991, p. 48.

42. Crowley, 1929, p. 262.

43. Anger cited in Wees, p. 107; Anger cited in Robert Haller, *Kenneth Anger: A Monograph* (Film in the Cities, 1990), p. 9.

44. Crowley, 1975, p. 72.

45. Crowley, 1975, p. 73.

46. Crowley cited in Richard Cavedish, *The Magical Arts: Western Occultism and Occultists*, Arkana, London, 1967, 1984, p. 83.

47. Crowley, 1975, p. 75.

48. Crowley, 1929, pp. 303–326.

49. Colin Low, *Ritual Theory and Technique*.

50. Anger cited in Rayns, p. 24.

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

70. J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, Papermac, London, 1922, 1992, pp. 11–48.

71. Peirce cited in Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, Third Edition, Secker & Warburg, London, 1969, 1972, pp. 123–4.

72. Anger cited in Sitney, p. 122.

73. Crowley, 1929, p. xiii.

74. Crowley, 1929, p. xiii.

75. "An interview with Kenneth Anger: conducted by Spider magazine", *Film Culture*, no. 40, spring 1966, p. 70.

76. Anger cited in Rayns, p. 31.

77. Faber Birren, *Color Psychology and Color Therapy*, Citadel Press, Secaucus, 1950, 1961, p. 61.

78. Jules B. Davidoff, *Cognition Through Colour*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass./London, 1991, p. 113.

79. Birren, p. 133; Davidoff, p. 114.

80. Davidoff, p. 114.

81. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, n.d., p. 46e.

82. Birren, p. 143.

83. Sergei Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, Faber & Faber, London, 1943, 1986, pp. 100–101.

84. Birren, p. 142.

85. Eisenstein, pp. 120–21.

86. Kenneth Anger, "Modesty and the art of film", in Jayne Pilling and Mike O'Pray (eds.), *Into the Pleasure Dome: The Films of Kenneth Anger*, BFI, London, 1989, p. 21. The tanka is a slightly longer poetic form than the haiku.

87. Aldous Huxley, *Texts and Pretexts*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1932, p. 222.

88. Anaïs Nin, "The artist as magician", in *A Woman Speaks*, W. H. Allen & Co., London, 1975, 1982), p. 189.

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

36. Nin, pp. 210–11. ▲

37. Kenneth Anger, "Modesty and the art of film", in Pilling and O'Pray, pp. 18–22. ▲

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)